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XXX.

AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN THE INSCRIPTION ON THE
DIGHTON ROCK ;

In a letter to the Rev. Samuel Webber, D. D.

By Hon. JOHN DAVIS, Esq. LL. D. F. A. A.



DEAR SIR,

THE copies, which we now have, of the inscription on the *Dighton rock*, are probably as correct, as can be obtained ; and whatever doubt there may be as to some of the figures or characters, from the variation in the copies, there are others, which, from the uniform correspondence of the copies, we may conclude to be exact. Of this description are the large triangular figures, which appear on every copy of the inscription. Some of the explanations, which have been suggested of this inscription, are evidently founded, in a considerable degree, on characters, which appear in different forms in different copies. And when the interpretation has reference to a supposed resemblance in the characters to letters in some of the ancient alphabets, a slight variation will materially affect the sense, and different copies, though bearing a general resemblance to *the eye*, will exhibit great diversity of *meaning*. If it could be determined, what was intended by those *conspicuous and strongly marked figures*, in which all the copies agree, we should be in a more likely way to ascertain the object of the entire inscription, and to form satisfactory conclusions as to its origin. Several *human figures*, and one representation of a *quadruped*, evidently appear on *all the modern copies*. They cannot be distinguished on that sent by Cotton Mather to the Royal Society early in the last century ; but that copy, as it appears in the Transactions of the Society, is so imperfect, that it can be of little or no use

in any inquiries on the subject. From the figures above mentioned, no precise inference can be drawn, as to the intent and object of the inscription. From the rudest people and from children among ourselves, nothing is more common than to see sketches of the human form and of animals, frequently without any particular plan, but from the wayward suggestions of an idle moment. Often indeed there is a plan and purpose in such delineations ; but from those figures alone, I apprehend, we can form no certain conclusion of the general scheme, which the delineators had in view. Some further definite elements are necessary to give meaning and consistency to the performance. A casual perusal of Charlevoix' voyage to North America, has afforded me a pretty satisfactory elucidation of another of the figures on this rock, respecting which I wish to submit my impressions to your consideration.

In his seventh letter, speaking of the modes of hunting among the Canadian Indians, he refers to Champlain for a peculiar method of hunting the moose, the deer, and the caribou, which he thus describes. " They inclose a part of a forest with stakes, interwoven with branches of trees, and leave but one narrow opening, where they lay snares, made of raw skins. This space is *triangular*, and from the angle of the entrance they draw *another triangle, much larger* ; so these two enclosures communicate together by the *two angles*. The two sides of the second triangle are also shut up with stakes, and the hunters range upon a line from the base. Then they advance, without breaking the line ; and drawing nearer and nearer to each other, they make a great shouting, and strike upon something that makes a great noise. The beasts being driven forward, and not able to escape, either to right or left, and being affrighted with the noise, know not where to fly, but into the other inclosure ; and many, as they enter it, are caught by the horns or

“ the neck. They struggle greatly to get loose, and sometimes they
“ carry with them or break the snares. Sometimes also they stran-
“ gle themselves, or at least give the hunters time to shoot them at
“ their ease. Those, which escape this, fare no better ; they are in-
“ closed in too small a space to shun the arrows, which the hunters
“ let fly at them from all sides.” I had frequently read the interest-
ing letters of Charlevoix, without being particularly attracted by this
passage ; but at the time of the perusal abovementioned, having been
called to pay some attention to the inscription on the Dighton rock,
it immediately occurred to me, that the *triangular inclosures*, thus de-
scribed by the writer, much resemble some very prominent figures in
that inscription. I soon after procured Champlain's Voyages from
the College Library, and found that Charlevoix had given a just sum-
mary of what is recorded by that faithful and intelligent traveller ; ex-
cepting that I do not find in Champlain any mention of the *snares of*
raw skins, at the entrance of the smaller triangle, specified by Charle-
voix. I was gratified to find in Champlain's book an engraved rep-
resentation of this *gigantic trap* ; of which I have taken a rude copy.
(See Fig. 19). By comparing this representation and the description
with two of the *uppermost figures* in Mr. Winthrop's copy of the in-
scription on the Dighton rock the resemblance will, I think, be appa-
rent to every observer. In Mr. Kendal's drawing is an additional re-
presentation of this figure near the bottom of the rock, under the fig-
ure of the quadruped. Whatever may have been intended by the ex-
hibition, it was evidently a favorite figure with those, who framed the
inscription, as we may infer from its being thus repeated. I am in-
duced to believe, that the very apparatus, described and sketched by
Champlain, was designed to be expressed by those resembling figures
on the rock.

This mode of hunting was not confined to the *Canadian Indians*. Roger Williams, writing of the Indians of New England, observes, "When they pursue their game, especially deer, which is the general and wonderful plenteous hunting in the country, they pursue in twenty, forty, fifty, yea two or three hundred in a company, as I have seen; when they drive the woods before them." (Hist. Coll. iii. 233). Hutchinson is more particular. "Besides their bows," says he, "they had other devices to take their game; sometimes by double hedges a mile or two in length, and a mile wide at one end, and made narrow by degrees, until they came to a gap of about six feet, against which they lay hid to shoot the deer, as they came through, in the day time; and at night they set deer traps, being springs, made of young trees." (Hist. of Mass. vol. i.) This writer, as well as Charlevoix, speaks of the traps, as well as of the large inclosures. Perhaps these *traps* are meant to be delineated in the large figure on the left of Mr. Winthrop's copy, which contains some interior appendages, not found in the other resembling figures.

I am further induced to consider this application of those figures to have been intended, from a consideration of the situation, compared with the places, in which it appears from Champlain, but more particularly from La Hontan, that such erections were made. The last mentioned writer, describing a similar mode of hunting, which he witnessed, mentions, that the inclosures were made on an *isthmus*, between two lakes. He gives a drawing, from which I have hastily copied the inclosed sketch. (See Fig. 20). Its resemblance to Champlain's figure, and to those on the rock, will be perceived. The lines of the fence without the triangle extend to the lakes. The advantage of this arrangement, to prevent the escape of the deer, is manifest. In the vicinity of the Dighton rock a similar situation is to be found. The rock is near the entrance of a neck of land, called *Asonet-Neck*,

formed by Asonet and Taunton rivers, which unite about four miles below the rock. (See a sketch, Fig. 21). Across this neck a trap of this sort might be framed with the same advantages, as in that, delineated by La Hontan ; and no portion of our country perhaps was more favorable for the amusement and exploits of the hunter. The territory east of Taunton river, and between that river and Plymouth and Sandwich, is so congenial to *deer* particularly, that they are still found in considerable plenty in the forests in that region. The river, neighbouring ponds, and forests abounding in game, would render this vicinity a desirable and favorite residence for the Indians. To such places, it appears from Roger Williams, they were in the habit of resorting in large companies for hunting, fishing, and fowling, at particular seasons of the year. During the intervals of leisure, incident to such occupations, as the art of designing was not unknown and not unfrequent among the Indians of this country, it seems altogether natural and probable, that some one or more among the companies, successively resorting to this spot, should be disposed to make a delineation, commemorative or indicative of their favorite employment. If the mode of hunting on the *grand scale*, above mentioned, were in use among the Indians of New England, of which I believe there is no doubt, the apparatus, employed in it, would take a strong hold of the imagination ; and, as with all its grandeur it happens to be extremely simple in its construction, there would be nothing difficult in the representation. This I believe to be the true explanation of the several resembling triangular figures on the *Dighton rock*. If this be admitted, it gives a key to the whole. The quadruped (probably representing a deer), the bird, which many observers find there, and the arrow heads, all become consistent appendages. The human figures represent the hunters : and, without any extravagance of imagination, I think we may trace a river, with weirs across it, for

the taking of fish. The whole indicating a grand hunting scene in all its interesting varieties. A scene, which, next to war, most powerfully interested the savage inhabitants of the country. On this idea, we may find a probable explanation of several other figures. I think, I can see the sort of *noose*, described with so much naïveté in the "Journal of a plantation settled at Plymouth," and in which governor Bradford was *caught by the leg, while he came to look upon it*; and we can also make out the *log-trap*, of which we have an account in Belknap and other approved writers on Indian habits and customs. I have mentioned, that the art of designing was not unknown and not unfrequent among the Indians of this country. To this purpose there are many unquestionable authorities. Charlevoix, speaking of their wars, observes, that the chief of the victorious party leaves on the field of battle his fighting club, on which he takes care to trace the mark of his nation, that of his family, and his portrait, i. e. an oval with all the figures he had on his face. Others paint all these marks on the trunk of a tree, or on a piece of bark, with charcoal, pounded and rubbed, mixed with some colours. To come nearer home, Morell, in his interesting Latin poem on New England, thus speaks of their skill in embroidery;

"Inducto tergo corpus

"Villoso, leviter miris se singula formis

"Texta ligant."—

And their baskets and other furniture he thus describes;

"Corbes

"Contextos formis, varioque colore tapetum,

"Stramine compositum tenui, mirisque figuris."

This is no poetic fiction. Honest Gookin says the same in plain prose; and expressly mentions these portraitures of birds, beasts,

fishes, and flowers. In the museum of the academy we have a specimen of their sculpture, an imitation of a serpent's head on the end of a stone pestle ; and Dr. Belknap mentions a bone, on which was engraven by Indians the bust of a man, apparently in the agonies of death. " I have heard," says the same estimable writer, " of two specimens of an Indian gazette found in New Hampshire. One was a pine tree, on which was depicted a canoe with two men in it. This is supposed to have been a mark of direction to those, who might come after. The other a tree in Moultonborough standing by a carrying place between two ponds, on which was carved the history of one of their expeditions. The number of killed and prisoners was represented by so many human figures, the former marked with the stroke of a knife across their throats." {Hist. of N. Hampshire, Vol. III.}. Of this general character I conceive the inscription on Dighton rock to be, though not representing such cruel and disastrous transactions. The peaceful but energetic exploits of the hunter, I suppose, were only intended to be delineated, and the human figures may be in honor of some of the *Nimrods* of the day.

In governor Winslow's account of the natives of New England we find this observation. " Instead of records and chronicles they take this course ; where any remarkable act is done, in memory of it, either in the place, or by some pathway over adjoining, they make a *round hole* in the ground about a foot deep, and as much over, which when others passing by behold, they inquire the cause and occasion of the same, which being once known, they are careful to acquaint all men, as occasion serveth, herewith. And lest such holes should be filled or grown up by any accident, as men pass by, they will oft renew the same. By which means many things of great antiquity are fresh in memory." Will not this practice account for the many *small circles*, which we find in our inscription, and which we may

suppose intended to give more permanency to the chronicle, than could be given by *holes in the ground*. Other marks of more irregular form I conceive to be merely the marks or signatures, appertaining to particular tribes, families, or distinguished individuals. Professor Pallas, in his travels into the north eastern provinces of Russia, mentions a monument not dissimilar, which he noticed on the bank of a river, emptying into the *Jenesei*. He conceives it to be a sepulchral monument, and mentions the bones found in the vicinity. The inscription he supposes to represent the signatures of the persons buried near the spot. In the collections of the Historical Society we find copies of engagements made by Awasuncks and her Indians with the governor of Plymouth in 1671, and another from the Dartmouth Indians. The originals were once in my hands, and I well recollect, that many of the signatures exhibited rude resemblances of birds, beasts, fishes, and other objects. One delineated a *tortoise* with considerable exactness. After the arrival of our ancestors and an intercourse with them, many of the Indians were fond of taking English names. Masassoit named his two sons Alexander and Philip. Those, who were able, would be proud to employ their English name, or at least the *initial*, when called upon to affix their signature. I have a deed given by *Wanasittas*, alias Alexander, in which he signs by affixing the letter *A* to the seal. This may help us to account for the Roman capitals, that appear on the rock, particularly in Mr. Kendal's copy. On the whole, I cannot but think it highly probable that general Washington's opinion of this inscription, given when he saw a copy of it in the college museum, is correct, and that it was the work of the native Indians of our country. It appears to me to have been designed to represent and commemorate exploits of hunting; and that the characteristic signatures of some of the principal actors were added. Its application to hunting is inferred principally from what

I suppose to be the meaning of the triangular figures. Of the justness of that opinion and of all the remarks suggested there cannot be a better and safer judge than yourself; for none, I am sure, is more habitually disposed to weigh with due deliberation every circumstance, which ought to enter into estimation in forming a correct decision. But that it may receive the scrutiny of many minds, you are at liberty, if you please, to communicate this letter to the Academy. In the leading idea I have some confidence. A more careful and thorough view of Indian habits, manners, and customs, than I have been able to take since I thought of making this communication, will either confirm the suggestion, or evince that it ought to be abandoned.

I am, sir, very respectfully,

and with great regard,

your ob't servant,

JOHN DAVIS.

P. S. General Washington's idea of this inscription was communicated to me by our friend, the reverend Dr. Lathrop, who was with him in visiting the college. He remarked as Dr. L. recollects, that he had repeatedly noticed similar inscriptions in the Indian country, in early life, which were unquestionably executed by the natives.

Fig. 19.

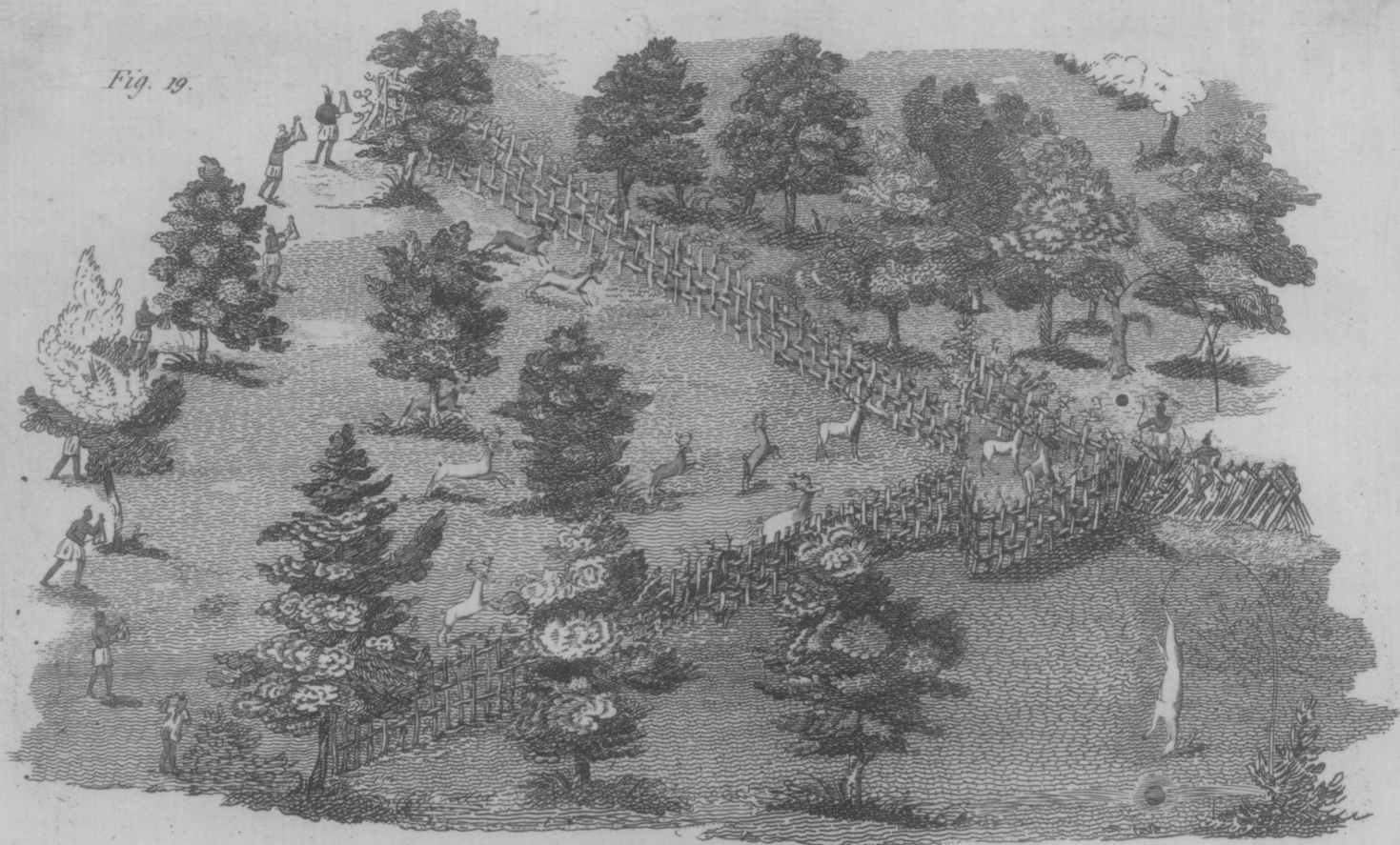


Fig. 21.

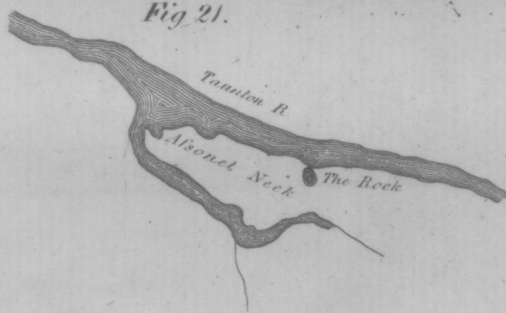


Fig. 20.

